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ABSTRACT

Imitation of organizational and sentence patterns is an ancient technique for teaching rhetoric, but to be effective, imitation must be informed, deliberate, and creative. Students must first learn to recognize the characteristics of a given style and then to appreciate the connection between specific stylistic qualities and their cumulative effects. Providing students with a set of questions that dissect the grammar, the vocabulary, and the literary mechanism of passages read in class helps them connect qualities and quantities in prose passages with the effects produced. Reading with an eye to imitation, in addition to inspiring rhetorical strategies, can help student-writers expand their own repertoires of sentence patterns. In addition to other exercises using fiction and nonfiction, an experiment in imitation and parody with Vladimir Nabokov's attack on "Philistines and Philistinism" allowed students at an Illinois university to play games with Nabokovian turns of phrase. Imitation as classroom activity, far from being confining, liberated the students when used as a tool for composing on stylistic models. Another exercise required the students to write an extended definition of "Ramboism," inspired by the Nabokov article. Parodic discourse, according to M.M. Bakhtin, is a hybrid of languages and styles and thus represents dialogue between object and subject--an argument between styles. Parody can act as a bridge from the apprehension and acquisition of the linguistic components from which styles are formed and the creation and mastery of stylistic individuality. As such, parody can prove a valuable tool for the writing teacher. (Sample exercises and references are attached.) (NKA)

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Liberating Parody

Strategies for Teaching Style

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Liberating Parody

Style is an expression of individuality in language and as such, I will argue, roughly analagous to the expression of individuality through personal adornment. As human beings in covering and uncovering the body must take into account climate, occupation, and custom, so must writers consider the structural constraints of the language they speak, the expectations and prejudices of the audience, and their own social and rhetorical aims. Beyond the demands of warmth and decency, of grammar and audience, lie the choices of self-expression. As the self-expressive dresser must be aware of the resources of Army Surplus or Bloomingdale's or Second-Hand Rose, so must the style-conscious writer realize the vast arrays of lexical and structural raw material available in English. To push my parallel a little further, the writing teacher can act as something like a fashion consultant--guiding students on stylistic mall-crawls, first making them aware of what the choices are and then helping them realize the standards by which they wish to choose.

Mere "window shopping" through one of those ubiquitous "readers" that turn up on most of our syllabi will not do the trick. The trial-and-error putting together of costumes--trying on--is essential. In Doris Lessing's dystopian novel, The Memoirs of a Survivor, a young girl on the brink of womanhood uses old garments, fabrics new and old, to fashion for herself a series of costumes that were in fact experimental selves: ". . . this little girl had found the material for her dreams in the rubbish heaps of our old civilisation, had found them, worked on them, and in spite of everything had made her images of herself come to life. . . . she was 'trying on' not a dress but

self-portraits" (58). Just as Lessing's Emily cuts and sews, discards and refashions, so must students of writing experiment with the lexical fabrics and syntactic patterns that can provide them with self-image. The development of linguistic style can be facilitated, I contend, by assignments that focus first on the identification of components and then move from imitation through parody towards the acquisition of individual voice.

Imitation of organizational and sentence patterns is an ancient technique for teaching rhetoric. In the classical and neo-classical curriculum, imitation served largely to inculcate "correctness"--it served as something like "pattern practice." Dipping into the trivium requires no defense, but it may require discretion: imitation, I would stipulate, must be creative not mechanical. Distinguishing instruction that focuses on the "what" of forms and models from that centering on the "how" of process, Erika Lindemann cautions that "rote" imitation may not lead to internalization of forms. Merely mechanical imitation is no equivalent to fashioning and fitting. How then can imitation be integrated into process-centered instruction? If, as Lindemann explains, such pedagogy works by enabling student-writers to "understand the composing process and become conscious of their own writing behaviors" (242), then imitation to be effective must be informed, deliberate, creative.

Before imitation can begin, students must be brought to recognize the characteristics of a given style and then to appreciate the connection between specific, measurable stylistic qualities and their cumulative effects. One technique that can instill in students some sense of the work of writing as well as of the power of stylistic choice and the resonances of English is to provide them with a set of

questions to be answered on passages from works being read in class. Students may tabulate such things as nouns versus verbs versus modifiers; or past-tense finite verbs versus present participles; or Germanic monosyllables versus words that are learned, long, and Latinate. They also examine the length and structure of sentences; hunt for metaphors; spy out alliteration, assonance, consonance; and, grapple with rhythm, pace, and tempo. By means of such dissection, students really look at and listen to the construction of sentence and paragraph. See Figure I--"Questions on Style."

Students in classes at Eastern Illinois University easily connect measurable qualities and quantites in prose passages and the effects they produce. They comment on, for example, the domination of action verbs in passages from Faulkner's "Pantaloon in Black," as opposed to the adjectival emphasis in a passage from Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" or the preponderance of concrete nouns in excerpts from Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." In the short term, an exercise that enables students to see and hear language in new ways gives them new things to say about words, syntax, diction. In the long term, becoming aware of the difference that voice, for instance, makes in a sentence, and in a paragraph, should bring a student-writer a little closer to conscious decisions as to when he or she will cast a verb in passive voice and when in active.

These examples come from fiction, but the dissection of style is at least as easy in the case of those prose pieces we think of as "non-fiction." Phyllis McCord, in an article on "Reading Nonfiction in Composition Courses: From Theory to Practice," urges a reconsideration of our definitions of "non-literary" and "non-fictional" with a view

towards a more effective use of readings in our composition courses. Only in apprehending so-called factual writing as "creative of the reality it presents" (749) can we embark on the "literary reading of any discourse" (749) that McCord advocates. Conflating theories advanced by Jakobson, Todorov, Hatlen, and Kermode, McCord concludes that "any text can be read as literary," because we can read it with attention to its reflexive aspect (751). In so doing, we focus--and here lies the pedagogical significance--on the process of text (751).

One text that dramatically embodies the fictional and reflexive qualities of non-fictional prose is Swift's "A Modest Proposal." Having barely recovered from the shock that Swift's rhetorical strategy inflicts on readers, students in my writing classes at Eastern Illinois undertook to create modest proposers and proposals of their own. Tackling problems such as small-town gossips, the prevalence of rape, and high-school detention policies, the apprentice satirists experimented with projecting consistently-characterized voices distinct from their own; at the same time, they confronted the challenge of conveying their solutions indirectly and tangentially. Any specifically stylistic Swiftian residue was harder to detect--with the striking exception of the student who opened her research paper on abuse in nursing homes as follows:

"It is a melancholy object to see those who wander aimlessly down dimily lit corridors and sit quietly alone in solemn despair. I am speaking of the abused elderly in the nursing homes of the United States."

In addition to inspiring rhetorical strategies, reading with an eye to imitation can help student-writers expand their own repertoires

of sentence patterns. My own already-decided-upon ventures into imitation games--and specifically the emulation of sentence patterns--was, to my delight, reinforced by a textbook newly adopted at Eastern Illinois--McMahan and Day's The Writer's Rhetoric. In a chapter on "Writing Effective Sentences," McMahan and Day provide a number of exercises in imitating such as balanced structure and periodic sentences. Working in class and reading the results aloud, we came up with many variations upon the theme of such as Virginia Woolf's "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well," and (a particular favorite), Orwell's "He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man, with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes." (63, 61) Our many variations on the Hindu included the following: "He was a weight-lifter, a sculpted mass of muscle, with slick blonde hair and a tanning-booth tan."

The writer I chose for more extended experiments in imitation and parody was Vladmir Nabokov--no bland stylist he. After we had read and argued over Nabokov's attack on "Philistines and Philistinism," we played games with Nabokovian turns of phrase. See Figure II, "An Exercise in Philistinism"; the Nabokovian text the students read, from his Lectures on Russian Literature, appears in The McGraw-Hill Reader. As you can see from even the samples in "An Exercise in Philistinism," the sentences lend themselves to humorous and parodic reworking. Nabokov's sentence, "Russians have, or had, a special name for smug philistinism--poshlust" (Figure II:IV), for instance, inspired many a resounding definition of jock or wimp or nerd. Class members competed for the privilege of reading their creations aloud, and inhibitions disappeared. An important bonus of these exercises was the realization

they effected of language as play. Young Americans of our day have for the most part lost touch with the entertainment words offer, and it was worth something to see them having fun with sentence structure. In the January 1987 issue of College English, Peter Elbow argues for the rehabilitation of the idea of language as making rather than communicating--as poesis (59 & passim). "Therefore," Elbow suggests, "when we choose paradigms for discourse, we should think not only about children using language to communicate, but also about children building sandcastles or drawing pictures" (58). Elbow associates this "exploratory" and "playful" use of language with writing as tool for thinking and learning. My experience with imitation as classroom activity was that, far from being slavish or confining, composing on stylistic models was liberating. My experience coincided with that of William Gruber who, in a 1977 article, attested that, for his students, "the act of imitation became a tool to achieve individual freedom; instead of stifling personalities, it liberated them" (quoted McMahan and Day 61).

Having discussed nationalism and ingested a dose of Nabokov's satirical style, my students were ready to tackle a new assignment. They were asked to write "a brilliantly witty and concise extended definition" of "Rambo-ism," allowing themselves to be inspired and influenced by "Philistines and Philistinism." See Figure III--"Paper Assignment."

Most of the resulting essays--a few of which, by the way, were pro-Rambo--were amusing, and some were surprisingly pithy. Nabokovian intricacies of sentence structure turned up quite naturally. In a sentence like "Rambo-ism is more or less synonymous with

All-Americanism: the stress is not so much on the violence he projects but the patriotism he stimulates," the traces of philistinism are fairly clear (see the first sentence in "An Exercise in Philistinism"). The rhythms and rhetorical strategy of Nabokov's "psuedo-idealist," . . . psuedo-compassionate, . . . psuedo-wise" (Sentence III) turn up in triads like "anti-delicate, . . . anti-wimp . . . anti-nerd" and "anti-compassionate, anti-social, . . . anti-patriotic." Less imitative uses of the repetition that marks Nabokov's style include the following sentence:

"Rambo-the hero is also Rambo of the grimy face, the grimy clothes, and the grimy torso."

The alliteration of Nabokov's "the genuine, the guileless, the good" may have inspired the sound repetitions of a sentence like this: "Rambo is a military machine, a one-man army with a god-like physique, unstoppable, unorthodox, unharmed in battle";

or this--"The Ramboist is more than an illiterate, inarticulate, ignorant, and unshaven heathen; he is a hero . . .".

The balanced structures and careful paradoxes that Nabokov works with seem to have influenced student sentences like the following:

"Every time a Rambo gets on his high-horse and rides off to save the day by killing, another Rambo seeks revenge. Both are congratulated by their followers and condemned by their enemies."

and--"Of course, there are some very fine female Ramboists, and a few older-generation Ramboists. However, the majority of Ramboists will be found at the grammar school playground or the local video-arcade. . ."

The rather daring repetition in the last passage might never have found its way into a paper after all intended for an English teacher without the permission granted by the example of Nabokov. In the quotation

that follows, the student-writer's "own" rhetorical question and answer introduces a sentence that echoes the introductory and parallel prepositional phrases of one of Nabokov's statements about the philistine (see 139):

"What makes Rambo a hero? I still don't know. In his love for death, for the extermination of human beings, he has become a national hero."

One student opened his essay, Ramboism--the Stone-Age Hero Again," as follows:

> The recent Ramboist movement in our country has brought back many feelings civilized people had long forgotten. These views reach an apex in Ramboism. Ramboism is the condition, voluntary or involuntary, in which a gross swelling of the brain, possibly due to a severe blow, strangles all speech and intellectual nerve centers and allows the steroid-producing glands to run rampant.

Here the writer--more adept to start with than some of his classmates--does not adapt any specific sentence in the essay on philistinism. He is, however, liberated by Nabokov's highly-wrought invective into shaping elaborate sentences and giving full reign to his own youthful sarcasm. My final Rambo-istic example also illustrates, in my opinion, an anxiety-free naturalizing of influence. In this last quotation, the paratactic series of parallel verb phrases incorporating noun clauses can be credited to Nabokov's example and yet the structure is not alien to the student's native stylistic context:

> The vision that impresses them is one of Rambo, a tower of power, with his extraordinary shotgun blowing away the enemy. Bloody masses lie in heaps on hilltops and in ditches, while Rambo pats himself on the back. How unrealistic it is to think that one man could endure all that he did, achieve all that he did, destroy all that he did.

In these essays, then, students who were relatively inexperienced and untutored writers made use of stylistic strategies that prior to their encounter with Nabokov they might never have considered. In addition, Nabokovian devices such as paratactic series and intricate repetitions were incorporated into the natural stylistic environment of the individuals' writing. In no case, in my view, did an "imitated" or "inspired" sentence stick out from its surroundings. It was my impression from reading these papers that an increased sense of the possibilities of word choice, word order and sentence rhythm, and a heightened feeling for expression as play had freed many students from the tedious rounds of <u>aspects</u> and <u>factors</u>, dummy subjects and linking verbs, that plague their coerced efforts at composition.

Parodic discourse, according to M.M. Bakhtin, is a hybrid of languages and styles and thus represents dialogue between object and subject: "two styles, two 'languages' . . . come together and to a certain extent are crossed with each other: the language being parodied . . . and the language that parodies" (75). In parody, as Bakhtin analyses it, styles, languages, linguistic points of view are crossed; there are two speaking subjects. Thus parody can be seen as an argument between styles, a "dialogue between points of view" that

offers the potential for the kind of "mutual illumination" Bakhtin finds in the polyphonic novel (76). Parody can act as a bridge from the apprehension and acquisition of the linguistic components from which styles are formed and the creation and mastery of stylistic individuality. As such--and as a trigger to the release of language into play--parody can prove a valuable tool for the teacher of writing. Digging into the remains of our civilization, a new generation of writers may be helped to make their images of themselves come to life.

Figure I
Questions on Style

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS FOR EACH PASSAGE TO BE STUDIED.

1. Which part of speech predominates? (Tabulate nouns, verbs, adjectives; calculate the proportions.)

2. Look at the verbs in the passage: are they predominately action verbs or linking verbs? transitive or intransitive?

3. Look at the nouns: are they concrete or abstract?

4. Consider whether the adjectives are largely attributive or predicate adjectives?

5. In examining the author's diction, consider whether there is a significant number of words that are noticeably "Latinate" in origin, words that are unusual or learned.

6. Tabulate the proportion of monosyllabic, bi-syllabic, and poly-syllabic words in the passage. It is particularly important to look at the percentage of words that are composed of more than two syllables.

7. Are there words or expressions that are markedly colloquial or regional?

8. Is there any variation in the "level" of diction, or does the author stick to a consistent "level of usage"?

9. Is there a significant proportion of words with marked connotative value?

10. What is the average sentence length? Is there a broad range of sentence length or is the range narrow?

11. Comment on sentence structure; tabulate the proportion of complex sentences as compared to simple and compound.

12. Can you find examples of parallel structure? Is parallelism a characteristic of the author's style?

13. Are there qualifications in the passage? Does the writer make use of rhetorical questions?

14. Does the writer make use of inversion, interrupting constructions, or periodic sentences?

15. Is there a pattern of repetition in the passage? Is any of the repetition incremental?

16. Read the passage aloud and consider its aural qualities. Are there instances of alliteration (repeated initial consonant sounds), assonance (repeated internal vowel sounds), consonance (repeated internal or terminal consonant sounds), or rhyme?

17. Can you comment on rhythm and pace in the passage? (You might try scanning lines that seem particularly marked in rhythm.)

18. Can you find figurative language? Are there metaphors or similes in the passage?

Figure II
An Exercise in Philistinism

Write sentences of your own imitating the structure of the following Nabokovian sentences from "Philistines and Philistinism."* Try to figure out just what you are imitating and to what effect Nabokov employs the structure or device. Can we begin to make generalizations about his style?

I. "Vulgarian" is more or less synonymous with "philistine": the stress in a vulgarian is not so much on the conventionalism of a philistine as on the vulgarity of some of his conventional notions (137).

II. A. The character I have in view when I say "smug vulgarian" is, thus, not the part-time philistine, but the total type, the genteel bourgeois, the complete universal product of triteness and mediocrity (138).

II. B. He is the conformist, the man who conforms to his group, and he also is typified by something else; he is a pseudo-idealist, he is pseudo-compassionate, he is pseudo-wise (138).

III. The rich philistinism emanating from advertisements is due not to their exaggerating (or inventing) the glory of this or that serviceable article but to suggesting that the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser (139).

IV. Russians have, or had, a special name for smug philistinism--poshlust (140).

*This essay from Nabokov's Lectures on Russian Literature (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) is collected in The McGraw-Hill Reader 2nd ed., ed. Gilbert H. Muller (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 136-40.

Figure III

Paper III is an essay of argumentative definition. Write a brilliantly witty and concise extended definition of--

"RAMBO-ISM."

Your essay should have an argumentative edge of some sort--your real purpose should be to persuade your audience to share your attitude (or your assumed attitude) towards the phenomenon of Rambo-as-hero and the complex of attitudes he embodies and elicits.
Use Nabokov's "Philistines and Philistinism" as a model for your essay; you will also want to consult Steinem's "Erotica and Pornography" and Priestley's "Wrong Ism" as examples of argumentative definition.

STEPS TO TAKE

Pre-Writing

Heuristics:
See how many techniques of definition you can use in conveying the meaning of "Rambo-ism."

A. Genus-Differentiae: ("Dictionary Definition")
Begin perhaps with the most suitable of the meanings of the suffix -ism that you found in your dictionary.

B. Definition by Example:
List as many characteristics as you can of Rambo and Rambo-clones; do this as quickly as you can and without too much thought. See what your sub-conscious can come up with.

C. Definition by Example:
Choose ten of the characteristics that you listed and jot down examples for each--a phrase will do.

D. Definition by Synonym:
Nabokov uses a number of synonyms for philistine; can you think of synonyms or near-synonyms for Rambo or his -ism?

E. Negative Definition:
As quickly and spontaneously as you can, list traits and atti- tudes that you consider "opposites" to Rambo and what he stands for.

F. Historical or Etymological Definition:
Does the name Rambo have an etymology? Can you make one up? How would you start? As for the historical approach, can you come up with a genealogy for Rambo? Does he "descend" from a line of heroes of his ilk? For serious etymologies, of course, we refer to the Oxford English Dictionary.

G. Synthetic or Associative Definition:
Example: "Happiness is a warm puppy."
Do some free associating and see what happens!

Free Writing

Without looking at your notes, write as fast as you can for ten minutes on the subject of Rambo-ism--anything at all that comes to mind. Just "relax" and write--forget grammar and mechanics for the moment. (Editing comes later.)

After you have completed the first two steps of Pre-writing, heuristics and Free Writing, then you are ready to Plan and to Draft.

Planning

Now look over all the sheets you have and try to come up with a plan. Jot down for yourself the topics you want to cover, the techniques you want to use. Then juggle the order until you have a workable plan.

Writing

Drafting:

Before you begin, you might want to go back and reread "Philistines and Philistinism." Close your book; then, read over all your notes and without looking at them, but looking at your plan, draft a version of what you want to say. This draft should probably be about 700-800 words, so that you can revise down to a polished and concise 400-450-word essay.

Revision:

Now you are ready to begin to incorporate stylistic imitations of Nabokov into your own satirical or argumentative definition of Rambo-ism. Look carefully at "P & P-sm," and choose stylistic characteristics and/or specific sentences or sets of sentences the structure of which you wish to imitate.

Your argumentative definition of Rambo-ism should also be a PARODY or at least an imitation of Nabokov's "Philistines and Philistinism." Try to imitate stylistic qualities of Nabokov's prose. Include a list of the characteristics you chose to imitate (and/or parody) at the end of your essay.

"LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD REVISITED" is a PARODY. Read it carefully to "get the idea."

READ YOUR PAPER ALOUD TO GET THE EFFECT OF YOUR STRUCTURE AND STYLE.

EDITING

Go over what you consider the final version of your paper and check the grammar and sentence structure. Have your Handbook beside you. Look particularly carefully for errors that may have cropped up on your previous papers. If, for instance, you have a tendency to write sentence fragments, check each "sentence" for completeness.

Type the paper in final form (consult "Course Policies" on Syllabus.)

and

PROOF-READ.

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